

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 4, September 2004

Learning and Planning at Cluster Reflection Meetings (part 2)

Part 1 of the reports on reflection meetings (issue Number 3, August 2004) concentrated largely on gatherings held in clusters in which a vibrant institute process had been established and attention was usually directed toward encouraging individual initiative, intensive institute campaigns, the multiplication of core activities, and fostering an outward-looking orientation.

In clusters that have already experienced some growth and have reached the most advanced level of development, the focus of reflection meetings has begun to shift to the implementation of approaches that will intensify growth. Attention is increasingly centered on collective teaching activities and projects to reach receptive populations, thus requiring greater preparation and planning for reflection meetings. Without slackening efforts to encourage and cultivate individual initiative, the institutions of the Faith acting in the cluster must consult on and organize campaigns for collective teaching programs to enroll ever-larger numbers of new believers. As a result, the emerging army of human resources raised up through institute campaigns in these advanced clusters has gained experience through establishing core activities and is now ready to be mobilized for intensive programs of growth.

The following three reports illustrate the evolution and growing complexity of reflection meetings. In Biharsharif, **India**, reflection meetings serve as a means for the believers to learn how to become more systematic in their collective undertakings. A report of a reflection meeting in Broward County, Florida, in the **United States**, demonstrates how such meetings can be used to launch a campaign to significantly multiply individual actions, which in turn can contribute to increased growth. The final example, from Baku, **Azerbaijan**, shows how reflection meetings can become part of the planning process of the institutions to prepare for and implement intensive programs of growth.

From Individual Initiative to Group Teaching in a Rural Cluster—Biharsharif, India

The first reflection gathering in the Biharsharif cluster in the state of Bihar, **India**, was held on 23 September 2001. Participation was initially limited to a few friends from three or four communities whereas today, on the average, over 100 believers from some sixteen communities regularly attend despite great obstacles, such as lack of transportation and poor infrastructure. The most recent gathering in August 2004 held in the village of Hargawan was the 17th such occasion in which believers from all over the cluster came together.

Hargawan lies six kilometers from the district headquarter town of Biharsharif. However, to make this journey, one has to cover a distance of 23 kilometers of semi-laid track, or take the alternate route, which is shorter by 11 kilometers but crosses two rivers. Whichever route is selected, some three to ten kilometers have to be traversed on foot. This challenge is typical of the many that face the inhabitants of this rural cluster. The Faith was established in this area decades ago during a period of mass teaching. Bahá'í activities were revived late in the Four Year Plan and have gathered momentum during the Five Year Plan. Reflection gatherings play a central role in the sustained and accelerated growth of the Cause now being witnessed. A report on the impact of these reflection meetings highlights the following lessons and experiences:

- Introduction of the scheme of coordination in the cluster [a Cluster Growth Committee] has ensured that activities, including reflection gatherings, have become much more systematic and better organized, a vast improvement from just a few months ago when the State Bahá'í Council or the Auxiliary Board member had to somehow make sure that the friends were informed about the next reflection gathering, and ensure that they were sufficiently motivated to attend. The believers now inform one another about these gatherings, ensuring a high rate of participation. There have also been many instances in which believers bring along seekers to reflection gatherings, which have become special occasions generating much enthusiasm and spirit. These seekers are usually active participants in core activities who go on to accept the Faith and join the ever-expanding Bahá'í family.
- It is now a set practice for the Cluster Growth Committee to meet a week before the event with the Local Spiritual Assembly and a few other friends in the locality that has offered to host the reflection gathering in order to consult about the program and other related details. Decisions regarding the program, physical arrangement, special presentations, etc., are generally made in these joint meetings.
- The cluster coordinator has explained: “These gatherings have been responsible for great transformations. Activities have become more systematic and better organized....We have noticed something very interesting—regular and effective reflection gatherings initially resulted in a constant increase in the level of individual initiative. But later, we discovered that even though these instances of individual initiative continued and in fact increased, participation in reflection gatherings gave the believers a greater ‘community orientation,’ motivating them to work more effectively in groups. These developments have greatly contributed to the quality of teaching activities which are now attracting the enthusiastic and confident involvement of an increasing number of believers. Such community spirit is also contributing to the strengthening of Local Spiritual Assemblies.”
- A believer who accepted the Faith over 20 years ago says: “Reflection gatherings have filled the entire community with excitement providing us with the realization of what needs to be done and how are we to do it. Regular interaction in these gatherings ensures that our efforts are based on existing human resources and this approach has paved the way for success. What has been most exciting is that when we meet with challenges, these are effectively addressed in the next reflection gathering and we invariably discover ways to meet them, whereas earlier, we used to depend on others to overcome these challenges for us.”

Concentrating Energies to Increase Enrollments—Broward County, Florida, USA

The following account of a reflection meeting in Broward County, Florida, *United States*, illustrates how the reflection meeting can serve to focus the energies of the individuals and institutions in a cluster to intensify growth. This report was presented in *Learning About Growth*, (volume 1, issue 2, May/June 2004), a newsletter of the Regional Bahá'í Council of the Southern States that is designed to share the constructive experiences of advanced clusters. It demonstrates the lighthearted spirit and enthusiasm of individuals and institutions that have increased confidence in their ability to teach the Faith effectively. By analyzing the activities that proved viable in the cluster, the institutions were able to organize and introduce a new plan to further intensify the work of expansion and consolidation.

From the very start of the Broward County, Florida, reflection gathering on May 17, it was clear that careful thought and consideration were given to making effective use

of the friends' time. The Cluster Growth Support Team, through close collaboration with an Auxiliary Board member and the area coordinator (also a member of the team), crafted a three-hour agenda that provided a strong focus for the friends to learn about the recent successes of the cluster and consider a strategy for how it can achieve growth to 100 new Bahá'ís by Riqdán 2005.

Where has our cluster been and where are we now? The friends carefully listened to and participated in the interactive presentation by the Auxiliary Board member: The progress of the cluster in the three years of the Five Year Plan is remarkable. From 2001 to 2002 there were seven enrollments. In 2002–2003 we had 14 enrollments. Now, in the most recent year, 2003–2004, the cluster had 46 enrollments. This indicates that the friends in this cluster are learning how to enroll steadily increasing numbers of new believers. It also says that more friends are getting trained and developing skills to be able to have new declarants. This progress is important in two ways: growth and diversity of new believers.

To date, cluster achievements included 20 devotional gatherings with 60 seekers; 40 study circles with 22 seekers; 4 character development classes with 50 seekers; 6 children's classes with 25 seekers; several firesides with 40 to 80 seekers; and over 200 seekers involved in core activities. What is happening is that while the friends are moving through the sequence of courses, they are learning how to invite the seekers to the core activities. They are also learning how to integrate the lines of actions. For example, the parents of the children who participate in the character development programs are starting to participate in study circles. Another example is when our seekers who attend the firesides are then invited to devotional gatherings and study circles. All this has contributed to 46 new believers.

ABM: Do you think this cluster is ready for an intensive program of growth?

Friends: YES!

ABM: How do you know you are ready?

Friends: We accomplished the six propitious conditions!

ABM: Let's look at the *Building Momentum* document: "A question often asked by the friends is how they will know when their cluster is ready for an intensive program of growth. One indicator that cannot be overlooked is growth itself..." We have 46 enrollments this year, so we have the first indicator. If you agree, raise your hand and shout "YES!"

Friends: YES!

ABM: Do you have a vigorous institute process?

Friends: YES!

ABM: Are you multiplying the core activities?

Friends: YES!

ABM: Are you learning to integrate seekers from one activity into another?

Friends: YES!

ABM: Do you have successful outreach programs?

Friends: YES!

ABM: Are you committed to increase your learning?

Friends: YES!

ABM: Are you ready to double the number to 100? Stand up and shout "Alláh'u'Abhá!"

Friends: Alláh'u'Abhá!!

ABM: To go from 46 to 100 enrollments this year, we need to look at the guidance. In the *Building Momentum* document, it states, "An intensive program of growth suggests just that—intensification—an intensification of activity that contributes to systematic growth." Which activity do you think brought in the most seekers in Broward?

Friends: Study circles.

ABM: Yes, it was study circles. First, we made the contact. Whom did we contact?

Friends: Friends, neighbors, co-workers, relatives.

ABM: Then what? What is the second step? We invite them to devotionals, firesides, and then we invite them to study circles. The third step is what?

Friends: Invite them to become Bahá'ís.

ABM: We have somewhere between 70 and 80 percent declaration rate when we invite seekers while they are in the study circle process. For Broward's intensive program of growth, we are simply going to intensify that process.

What are we going to do next?

ABM: Last year, we had 11 to 12 average number of enrollments every three to four months. This year, we want 24 to 25 enrollments every three to four months, with 40 to 50 seekers in study circles. That means we will want to have 400 contacts to invite to the core activities. So, if 100 friends each make four contacts we will have a good start on this.

The friends then broke up into small groups and consulted on ways to determine who their seekers are and how can they reach them.

What elements made this reflection gathering successful?

1. It was well planned and organized by the Cluster Growth Support Team in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board member and the area coordinator.
2. The environment at the gathering was carefully planned for the friends to learn.
3. The friends at the gathering had a sense that they are in motion, e.g.: Where have they been? Where are they now? What are they going to do next?
4. Consultation, grounded in guidance, aided the friends to find answers to questions.
5. The friends committed themselves to a plan of action for the next few months.
6. The arts were incorporated effectively, but not overused, with well-placed songs and poetry readings to keep the atmosphere uplifting and spiritual.

Planning for an Intensive Program of Growth—Baku, Azerbaijan

A series of three meetings was held in the Baku cluster in *Azerbaijan* to initiate a systematic teaching project. A single Local Spiritual Assembly oversees the affairs of this urban cluster.

1. Meeting with the Local Spiritual Assembly and Auxiliary Board members serving Baku.

The institutions analyzed the details of the available human resources and the current level of activities, trying to determine how many more individuals could enter study circles, children's classes, and junior youth groups, considering the current level of human resources. Also discussed was the launching of a teaching project for a period of two weeks with the idea of teaching the Faith directly and inviting people either to join the Faith or enroll in the institute courses. The following conclusions were reached:

- The Local Assembly decided that it could mobilize around fifty believers for a two-week-long teaching project, aiming to reach out to some five hundred individuals, with the expectation that about fifty would either join the Faith or a study circle for Book 1 of the Ruhi Institute. Moreover, it was expected that teaching the Faith to so many individuals would also bring in approximately eighty children to children's classes and junior youth groups. Additionally, some fifty people would need further follow-up that could be conducted by teams of believers carrying out home visits.
- The Local Assembly decided to announce this teaching project in the upcoming reflection meeting, form teaching teams, and start the project immediately following the meeting.

- The Local Assembly formed a task force to coordinate the teaching project and anticipated that, at the conclusion of the project, it would consider the desirability of turning the task force into a more permanent structure, such as a local teaching committee.
2. *Meeting with the National Institute Board and Baku coordinators.* This meeting provided an opportunity to explore together the functioning of the Institute Board and its coordinators in light of the intensive program of growth soon to be launched. The institute was already doing very commendable work in the Baku cluster; as of early June, there were 19 study circles, 10 children's classes, and 4 junior youth groups.
- Discussion focused on the idea of three groups of human resources dedicated to each of the three lines of training—study circles, children's classes, and junior youth activities—so that believers, on completing the courses, could offer to develop their capacity in one of the three lines. In this way, each cluster coordinator would always have a “standing army” to call upon, and could react quickly to the needs that would undoubtedly arise as a result of the launching of the intensive program of growth in Baku.
 - The three institute cluster coordinators contacted many believers and compiled their respective lists of available human resources. On the completion of the teaching project phase, the institute would quickly provide the needed resources for the training of those who expressed their readiness to join the training and educational activities.
3. *Baku cluster reflection meeting.* There were approximately sixty friends in this meeting. The Local Assembly and Auxiliary Board members introduced the idea of launching an intensive program of growth in Baku. Four receptive groups were identified, and the friends were asked to join one of the teams that would teach among those groups.
- Forty-eight individuals enthusiastically joined the teams. Although the majority of these friends were those studying the higher books of the institute, there were also those who had gone through only one or two books, as well as a few who were not involved in the institute process.
 - Seven teams were formed and one person in each team was selected as the group leader. The meeting quickly broke up into small groups so that each team could start discussing its own plan and approach.
 - The training institute announced a refresher course on Book 6 so that the team members could refine their approach to teaching. By the end of the meeting there was a great deal of enthusiasm and eagerness to move into the field of teaching.

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